

# *Veiled Sentiments*

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HONOR AND POETRY  
IN A BEDOUIN SOCIETY

*Updated Edition with a New Preface*

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town life corrupting and most of its inhabitants immoral, and they had no interest in moving there. The core families' long-standing wealth, which suffered a brief setback in the 1950s but was regained through the Haj's shrewd economic direction, had shielded them from government interference and freed them from having to cooperate in government settlement schemes. This economic viability allowed the core families to support clients and poor relations, thus keeping them within the group. It also enabled the community to set its own moral standards and maintain a separate identity.

All the trends in the shifting Bedouin economy (to be described in chapter 2) were represented in the diverse activities by which the members of this community supported themselves. The core families had large sheep herds, which they viewed as their main enterprise, and they had small camel herds for prestige. They had planted olive and almond trees and regularly pressed olive oil for their own consumption. They owned bits of agricultural land from which they hoped to make some profit. Every year they sowed barley. The first year of my stay, there was little rain and no harvest; the second year there was a small crop. The Haj, unlike his brothers, had contacts in Cairo and Alexandria for whom he acted as a middleman in real estate ventures on the coast, and in turn he was persuaded to invest with his partners in urban property. All of the brothers had engaged in smuggling in an earlier period. The various client families attached to these core families worked as shepherds and did odd jobs, including building, harvesting, painting, gardening, and so forth, for their patrons. They also raised rabbits, pigeons, and a few goats.

What changes in lifestyle they had made were voluntary adaptations to shifting conditions. Although they had taken advantage of government assistance in tree planting, they had built their own houses, and when the government claimed all Western Desert lands, they had arranged for the purchase of their traditional land. They had last migrated to desert pastures seven years before my arrival, but for a host of practical and emotional reasons they had

stopped going; each year, however, the idea was raised anew. They had no electricity, although the Haj had purchased a generator that sat broken most of the time I was there. One house had tapped into a pipeline that brought water nearby, but most of the households sent their adolescent girls with donkeys carrying jerry-cans to fetch water from the main taps. In the spring, after the rains, people got some of their water from a well shared by several neighboring communities. They had requested that a government school be built nearby, which many of their children attended.

This sketch must serve as an introduction to a community that the reader will come to know in depth. The problem this book explores became apparent to me in the course of living with this group of people, and in part as a function of the interactions I had with them. Therefore, the reader will need some sense of the fieldwork experience before the theoretical issues are presented.

### *Fieldwork*

An honest account of the circumstances of fieldwork, not merely a perfunctory note stating the dates the anthropologist was in the host country, is, as Maybury-Lewis points out in his introduction (1967), both essential for the evaluation of the facts and interpretations presented in an ethnographic report and sometimes embarrassing. Especially for young anthropologists, perhaps insecure about their professional competence, the cloak of secrecy shrouding the fieldwork experiences of successful predecessors inspires fantasies. It is easy to imagine, for example, that these great figures were not plagued by doubts about their abilities, the adequacy of the material they collected, or their hosts' feelings toward them. Rather, they must have begun with the ideas set forth in their final products, polished, crisp, and profound. But on a day when people are busy and you are alone in a desolate land-

scape, suffering from fever and being eaten alive by fleas or annoyed by a child poking fun at you, the question of whether *this* is the experience that carries such dignified labels as "research" or the more scientific "data collection" nags. And yet, the nature and quality of what anthropologists learn is profoundly affected by the unique shape of their fieldwork; this should be spelled out.

I do not believe that the encounter between anthropologists and their hosts should be the sole object of inquiry. Only a rare sensitivity and perceptiveness can redeem the solipsism of this project.<sup>5</sup> However, to ignore the encounter not only denies the power of such factors as personality, social location in the community, intimacy of contact, and luck (not to mention theoretical orientation and self-conscious methodology) to shape fieldwork and its product but also perpetuates the conventional fictions of objectivity and omniscience that mark the ethnographic genre.<sup>6</sup>

Taking an intermediate position, I will present only a few of the elements in my fieldwork situation that were most salient in setting the parameters of what I could do and discover. Out of this experience, shaped by how others in the community perceived me and what I felt comfortable with in my relations with them, arose the issues treated in this book. Thus the exercise is necessary to introduce the proper subject of study, which is the relationship between Awlad 'Ali sentiments and experiences and the two contradictory discourses that express and inform them: a genre of oral lyric poetry of love and vulnerability on the one hand, and the ideology of honor in ordinary conversation and everyday behavior on the other.

I arrived in Cairo at the beginning of October 1978 and ensconced myself at an unpretentious pension frequented by generations of Arabists, Egyptologists, and scholars of modest means. The hotel boasted a view of the Nile, such illustrious neighbors as the great old hotels—the Semiramis, Shepherd's, and the Hilton—and easy walking distance to the American University. In the many years since I had last stayed there as a young girl traveling with my family, nothing much had changed—the lumpy beds, the plumb-

ing, and the gentle hotel personnel bore the inevitable marks of old age. Outside, however, the city seemed to be in the throes of change. The progressive dilapidation of old buildings had in some cases led to their collapse, and in other parts of the city construction of massive new luxury hotels was underway.

I familiarized myself with the city, more crowded and noisy than ever, and awaited my father's arrival. Here the reader might pause. I suspect that few, if any, fathers of anthropologists accompany them to the field to make their initial contacts. But my father had insisted that he had something to do in Egypt and might just as well plan his trip to coincide with mine. I had accepted his offer only reluctantly, glad to have the company but also a bit embarrassed by the idea. Only after living with the Bedouins for a long time did I begin to comprehend some of what had underlain my father's quiet but firm insistence. As an Arab, although by no means a Bedouin, he knew his own culture and society well enough to know that a young, unmarried woman traveling alone on uncertain business was an anomaly. She would be suspect and would have a hard time persuading people of her respectability. I of course knew of the negative image of Western women, an image fed by rumor, films, and, to be sure, the frequent insensitivity of Western women to local standards of morality and social communication patterns.<sup>7</sup> But I had assumed I would be able to overcome people's suspicions, first by playing up the Arab half of my identity and not identifying with Westerners, and second by behaving properly. I was confident of my sensitivity to cultural expectations because of my background. Not only had I lived in Egypt for four years as a child, but, more significant, I had also spent many summers with relatives in Jordan. As part of that household I had had to conform to some extent to the codes of conduct appropriate to Arab girls, my many cousins providing models for this behavior. I felt I had internalized much that would help me find my way with the Bedouins and not offend them.

What I had not considered was that respectability was reckoned

not just in terms of behavior in interpersonal interactions but also in the relationship to the larger social world. I had failed to anticipate that people as conservative as the Bedouins, for whom belonging to tribe and family are paramount and the education of girls novel, would assume that a woman alone must have so alienated her family, especially her male kin, that they no longer cared about her. Worse yet, perhaps she had done something so immoral that they had ostracized her. Any girl valued by her family, especially an unmarried girl whose virginity and reputation were critical to a good match, would not be left unprotected to travel alone at the mercy of anyone who wished to take advantage of her. By accompanying me, my father hoped to lay any such suspicions to rest.

After making contacts in Cairo, we set off for Alexandria. There we spoke with social researchers conducting a study of the Mariut Extension, the site of a land reclamation and resettlement scheme in the Western Desert. The director of field research generously offered us accommodation, transport to the Bedouin town closest to their research, and a promise to introduce us to his Bedouin contact. I still remember driving out to the sun-baked town, which, at midday, was quiet and nearly deserted. We drove around in search of this informant, finally tracking him to his small house. My father and the research director had a long conversation with him while I sat quietly in the back of the vehicle, shy, barely understanding what was being said, and feeling distinctly unlike an anthropologist.

My father had explained that his daughter, who had been raised in the United States, wished to improve her Arabic and to learn about their society and would need to find a good family with whom to live. After some deliberation, the man guided us to a hamlet consisting of a number of houses and tents. As we approached we could see people scurrying to shake out straw mats from the tents. We were greeted by several men. My father went with the men into one of the houses, and I, along with a couple of the female researchers from the Mariut project, was invited into a

nearby tent. We sat surrounded by a large group of curious women and children. We asked them questions and they asked questions of us. Again, I felt peripheral. I understood little of what the Bedouin women were saying and had to rely on the Egyptian university students to translate from the fast-paced dialect. They too had some difficulty understanding. We did not stay long but soon piled into the van over the protests of our hosts, who wished us to stay for a meal. The project director explained that they wanted to slaughter a sheep for us, as they would for any honored guest. The Haj, head of the community, had not been there; my father had spoken instead with his brothers and had left him a letter explaining the situation and placing me under his protection. When I returned the next day, the Haj welcomed me and said that he would be happy to have me live with them.

This introduction to the community profoundly affected my position and the nature of the work I could do. First, it identified me, despite my poor linguistic skills and my apparent foreignness, as a Muslim and an Arab. My Muslim credentials were shaky, as I did not pray and my mother was known to be an American. But most assumed that I shared with them a fundamental identity as a Muslim, and my father's speech was no doubt so sprinkled with religious phrases that they believed in his piety, which in turn rubbed off on me. Many times during my stay I was confronted with the critical importance of the shared Muslim identity in the community's acceptance of me. As always, the old women and the young children bluntly stated what most adults were too polite to say. The hostility they felt toward Europeans (*naṣāra*, or Christians) came out in the children's violent objections to my listening to English radio broadcasts, an old woman's horror at the thought of drinking out of a teacup a European woman visitor had just used, and comments made about an American friend who came out to visit me (whom they liked very much) that she was good "for someone of her religion" (*'ala dīnhā*).

It was also clear that I came from a good family and good stock, so the Haj's family could accept me as a member of their household

without compromising their social standing. My father's beautiful Arabic and the fact that he was not an Egyptian but a "Jordanian" (as he had been introduced) were topics of much discussion. The Bedouins believe that all non-Egyptian Arabs are Bedouins, speaking a decent dialect and living a lifestyle similar to their own. So they considered my father a fellow tribesman and a person with noble roots (*aşl*), the importance of which will be explored in the next two chapters. I often heard them defend their acceptance of me on these grounds.

Most of all, by accompanying me my father had shown those with whom I would be living and on whose good opinion and generosity my life and work would depend that I was a daughter of a good family whose male kin were concerned about her and wanted to protect her, even when pursuit of education forced her into potentially compromising positions. The Haj and his relatives took seriously their obligation to my father, who had given them the sacred trust of protecting me. Although the Haj understood that I was there to find out about their customs and traditions (*'ādāt wtaqālīd*) and in our initial chat assured me that I must feel free to go anywhere that my study required as long as I informed him of my whereabouts, I soon discovered that my freedom was in fact restricted. Through the subtle cues of tactful but stubborn adults, I came to understand that I was to feel free to go anywhere within the camp but that to step beyond the bounds of the community, particularly alone, was not appropriate.

The restrictions on my movements had several motives. As the Haj explained to me in one exasperated moment, they feared for my safety. They would be responsible if anything happened to me, and they did not relish the idea of becoming embroiled in vengeance matters. Also, by living with them I was automatically identified as a member of their family. Perceived by all as one of the women in the Haj's kin group, my actions reflected on them and affected their reputations. They had to make sure I did nothing that could compromise them by insuring that, as far as possible, I conformed to the same standards of propriety their women

did, meaning that I was restricted in where I could go, by whom I could be seen, and with whom I could speak. But I also realized later that another reason they discouraged me from visiting those outside the community was that I would thus involve them in social obligations they had not chosen. If I visited another tribal group, I would be greeted as a member of the Haj's group. People usually offer a feast for first-time guests, and I would thus incur a social debt for them.

The other consequence of my introduction to the community as my father's daughter was that I was assigned and took on the role of an adoptive daughter. My protection/restriction was an entailment of this relationship, but so was my participation in the household, my identification with the kin group, and the process by which I learned about the culture, a sort of socialization to the role. Although I never completely lost my status as a guest in their household, my role as daughter gradually superseded it. The choice pieces of meat they initially set aside for me were later offered to other guests instead. I became part of the backstage when we had company, found myself contributing more to household work than I wished, and had my own chores. Men occasionally shouted commands at me and felt free to get me up late at night along with the women and girls to help serve tea to visitors.

I should not give the impression that this role was forced on me. I was a willing collaborator. In a society where kinship defines most relationships, it was important to have a role as a fictive kinsperson in order to participate. I knew what was expected of an obedient daughter and found it hard to resist meeting those expectations. Not everything I did to help in the household was because of my status as daughter. I was grateful to the people in my household for graciously including me in their lives and counting me as a member of the family. Although I was not that much of an extra burden, I felt uncomfortable being idle when the women and girls worked so hard. With time I developed close relationships with the Haj's first wife, Gatīfa, and his daughters. It was to assist them that I worked, especially during difficult periods such as when Gatīfa



was ill and was trying, before her co-wife joined her, to run the household with only the help of one adolescent daughter. During her difficult pregnancy, I spent much of my time with her, massaging her and worrying about her health, trying to take over what little of her work I was competent to do. During these periods, as I filled water containers, collected straw for the oven, carried trays of bread, or peeled endless zucchinis for dinner, I would worry that I was not filling my notebook with information and that time was passing. If I was occasionally resentful, mostly I felt that the personal responsibilities I had toward the individuals who cared for me and treated me not as a researcher but as a member of a household came first.

Two other aspects of my identity affected the nature of my social relationships with the Bedouins, and thus the type of research I was able to carry out. First, I could not have been a daughter without being female. As a woman I often found myself confronted with difficulties not faced by male researchers, but I also enjoyed advantages of access and unexpected pleasures of intimacy in the women's world. In my first few weeks I tried to move back and forth between the men's and women's worlds. Gradually I realized that I would have to declare my loyalties firmly in order to be accepted in either. With the exception of the Haj, whom I got to know very well through almost daily conversations and occasional long car rides to Cairo, I found visits with the men boring because of the limited range of topics we could politely cover. So I opted for the women's world, refusing more and more to leave their company when the men called. This choice met with silent approbation from the women and girls, and so I was incorporated into their world, involved in their activities, and made privy to their secrets. Because relations in the women's world are more informal than in the men's, I was able to get beyond polite conversation more quickly.

The other factor was my unmarried status, the problems of which have been noted by two Arab women trained as anthropologists in the West who returned to do fieldwork in their societies of origin (Altorki 1973; Abu-Zahra 1978). Being unmarried

not only cast me in the role of daughter, but since I was far older than the unmarried Bedouin girls, it also placed me in an ambiguous position. I wished to be part of the women's world, but I did not have one of the most important defining characteristics of women: children. The gap between the two categories is symbolized by clothing, and when I decided to convert to wearing clothing like theirs I was in a quandary. Married women wear black veils and red belts (see chapter 4), whereas unmarried girls wear kerchiefs on their heads and around their waists. I compromised, wearing some women's clothing and some girls' and then tying my kerchief in a non-Bedouin way. In the end, they put me in an intermediate category. The only real problem this status caused was that it prevented me from asking certain questions about sexuality—I was assumed to be ignorant, and I had no intention of disabusing people of this view, as I wanted to protect my reputation. But women seemed to talk openly, joking bawdily even in front of children, and so I did not feel that the topic was completely closed.

In the first months, even as I appreciated the warm acceptance I received, I chafed at the restrictions of my role and position in the community. It was difficult being so dependent. Also, although I enjoyed living in the Haj's household and felt infinitely more comfortable around the people I knew best, I was worried by the idea of what anthropologists were supposed to do. I thought I should be going door to door, meeting everyone in the vicinity, and conducting surveys. I did not think it appropriate to confine my contacts to one kin group or community. And yet to defy my hosts would have been insulting and would have seriously jeopardized my relations with them. They, after all, had undertaken to protect and care for me. My obligation as a dependent was to respect their wishes, and my role as a daughter, like that of Jean Briggs among the Eskimos (Briggs 1970), made defiance especially inappropriate.

My relations with people in the community changed over time, at certain junctures shifting radically, as when a new woman

moved into our household, catapulting me into the inner circle of those who already belonged; but for the most part change was gradual. Where I had at first strained to understand what was being said, felt awkward, and done more observing than interacting, as I came to know more people and as my language abilities improved I began to participate more. In the first few months I went to Cairo as frequently as every two or three weeks to shower, eat, buy medicine, get mail, and speak English. By the end I felt enough at home that I went for a period of nearly three months with only a day in Cairo to attend to some urgent business.

What bothered me most after the first few months was that my relationship with the people I lived with did not seem symmetrical. I do not mean this in the usual sense of a power or wealth differential in the anthropologist's favor; I was, after all, a dependent and daughter with nothing to offer but my company. Rather, I was asking them to be honest, so that I could learn what their lives were like, but at the same time I was unwilling to reveal much about myself. I was presenting them with a persona: I felt compelled to lie to them about many aspects of my life in the United States simply because they could not have helped judging it and me in their own terms, by which my reputation would have suffered. So I doctored my descriptions and changed the subject when they asked about me, but I felt uncomfortable doing so. How ethical was it to present myself falsely, to pretend that I shared their values and lived as they did even when I was not with them? They knew nothing of my former life, my friends, family, university, apartment—in short, much of what I considered my identity. Unlike other anthropologists, who not only can present themselves as different but can use the difference as a way of stimulating discussion, I had to dissociate myself as much as possible from Americans. With my Arab identity, I dared not say, "Where I come from, they do . . ." What bits they heard were sufficient to make them doubt my father's wisdom in choosing to live and bring up his children among non-Muslims.

Eventually, this sense of inauthenticity subsided. As I participated more fully in the community and loosened my ties to my other life, and as we came to share a common history and set of experiences on which we could build relationships, I *became* the person that I was with them. That was sufficient for honest interchanges. Although there always remained an element of asymmetry in that I was writing about them and was observing perhaps a bit more closely than they were, for the most part I felt that we came together as individuals responding to situations in which we participated equally. This experience may correspond to what some other analysts of the fieldwork experience call the development of intersubjectivity (Rabinow 1977, 155).

There were moments when I became aware of a transition in my relations with people, even though the process of change went unnoticed. The intensity of my feeling of belonging and the extent to which this life had become natural struck me one day about fifteen months into fieldwork. I was awakened in the morning by one of the Haj's daughters, who ran into my room with the exciting news that our neighbor had returned from the pilgrimage. We had feared him dead or imprisoned because he had been caught without a passport during the seizure of Mecca's Haram Mosque and had not been heard from. She urged me to hurry and ready myself to attend the feast welcoming him home. I dressed in my best clothes.

As we set off, I realized how proud I was that I finally had the proper items: a new dress my hosts had given me at the last wedding, made of a colorful synthetic, the latest in Bedouin fashion; a red belt; and a black shawl to wear on my head. I knew that my new sweater (worn *under* my dress), brightly colored and interwoven with metallic threads, would be much admired, as would my gaudy new bead necklace, a gift from my friend the seamstress. I was able to see myself as I would be seen by others, and I took pleasure in knowing that I was finally acceptably attired for a festive occasion. I was also prepared to cover my face with my shawl

as we passed in sight of the men's tent en route to the women's section. By this time I would have felt uncomfortable had I not been able to veil.

On entering the tent crowded with women, I knew exactly which cluster to join—the group of “our” relatives. They welcomed me naturally and proceeded to gossip conspiratorially with me about the others present. This sense of “us versus them,” so central to their social interactions, had become central to me, too, and I felt pleased that I belonged to an “us.” Later, when there was a shortage of help in preparing the tea for the guests, I assisted, assuming the proper role of a close neighbor.

I left the festivities with a few of the women from our community and spent the rest of the day going from household to household, visiting, catching up, listening to different sides of the story of the latest camp crisis, an argument between an aunt and niece. In the late afternoon a few of the adolescent girls came to find me, urging me to come with them while they collected firewood from a nearby olive orchard that was being pruned. It was a beautiful day, and I welcomed the chance to be outside, so I hurried off with them. They showed me where their cousins had just killed a large snake and explained more about the family argument I had just been hearing about. We hauled branches and twigs and loaded them onto donkey carts for a while, and then, as the sun sank, we started for home. A donkey cart driven by two young men from our camp passed us. My companions—two women, three girls, and a toddler, all from my household—flagged them down, begging for a ride. But the young men were in a hurry and tried to wave us aside, no longer treating me as an honored guest to be pampered. We gave chase, though, and jumped onto the moving cart, laughing wildly and exchanging joking insults with the young men.

That evening as we sat around the kerosene lantern, talking about the celebration we had attended, swapping bits of information we had gathered, and feeling happy because we had eaten meat, I became aware of how comfortable I felt, knowing everyone being discussed, offering my own tidbits and interpretations,

and bearing easily the weight of the child who had fallen asleep on my lap as I sat cross-legged on the ground. It was only that night, when I dated the page in my journal, that I realized it was only a few days until Christmas. My American life seemed very far away.

Even though my feelings toward them had changed, I do not think it was until a certain funeral that I became fully human (because social) to many in the camp. People's fears that I did not care about them in the same way they cared about me came out in their half-joking accusations that I would forget them as soon as I left and that I would never return to visit. The Haj's mother was not domineering, but she was a key figure in the camp, the ultimate moral authority. I knew that although she liked me, she wondered what I was really doing there, and she was always a bit reserved. Her brother's funeral finally changed her attitude toward me. When we got word that he had died, I insisted on going with the women in our household to pay condolences. I found the whole scene very moving, with the wailing and “crying.”<sup>8</sup> When I squatted before the old woman to embrace her and give her my sympathies, I found myself crying. Her grief pained me, and because she had been ill for a while, I feared for her health. With each new arrival the ritualized mourning laments would begin again, and I could not hold back my tears. This funeral had awakened my own grief over the death of my grandmother and a cousin, neither of whom I had mourned properly.

I later heard from others how touched the old woman had been that I had come immediately, like her kinswomen and daughters-in-law, to mourn with her. Others told me that it had meant a great deal to her to know that I genuinely cared and could feel with her the grief over the loss of her only blood brother. From that time on, she treated me differently, even weeping as she sang me a few poignant songs about separation just before I left the field.

The sorts of constraints and advantages my particular position in the community created for my ethnographic project should be



apparent from what I have described. However, if my hosts' assumption that I was part of their moral community, not a foreigner with immunity, placed restrictions on me, it also allowed me to participate in a unique way. By being a daughter, I was forced to learn the standards for women's behavior from the inside, as it were—it was a process of socialization as much as observation. The only drawback was that, like Altorki (1973), I found that people expected me to know things that I did not in fact know, and my hesitation to betray my ignorance, especially in matters of religion, did prevent me from pursuing some topics that I otherwise might have. Nevertheless, living in a social world defined by the same boundaries as those experienced by members of the community allowed me to grasp more immediately just how the social world worked and how its members understood it.

It suited my temperament and my interests to be confined to a small group whose members I could come to know intimately. As I became more familiar with the people I lived with, I felt less and less interested in meeting strangers. I found the superficial conversations possible with them tedious, and I quickly tired of answering questions about what they grow in *amrika*. I had become interested in the complexities of interpersonal relations in Bedouin society and was seeking the concepts by which Awlad 'Ali understood their social world and acted within it. This kind of knowledge could only come from knowing people intimately, and over time.

The lacunae that result from a close study of daily life are not minor. I sometimes despaired that I was not compiling histories of the relations between tribal groups or tracing patterns of territorial control. But what I sacrificed in breadth was, I believe, amply compensated for by a depth of knowledge of individuals, on which the analysis to follow draws. And counting out-married kinswomen, affines, and people about whom I heard a great deal but never met, I am convinced that my knowledge of the society is based on a "sample" larger than the fifteen households that formed the core community.

Whether this community could be considered representative of Awlad 'Ali is perhaps a meaningless question. Insofar as other Bedouins were considered within the same social and moral universe (unlike Egyptians)—and those I met on visits to other communities seemed to differ little except in the quality and quantity of traditional and modern goods they possessed—I would say that this community was representative. However, unique "cultures" develop in any close community, including individual families, and in this sense my community probably differed from all others. I do not think this makes my observations less valid.

My concentration on the women's world might also be considered a limitation. In many ways, however, my access to both worlds was more balanced than a man's would have been. Except in rare instances, male researchers in sex-segregated societies have far less access to women than I had to men. Not only was my host an extremely articulate and generous informant about himself and his culture, but his younger brother, sons and nephews, and the client-status men were all frequent visitors in the women's world with whom I could speak relatively freely. Furthermore, the structure of information flow between the men's and women's worlds was not symmetrical. Because of the pattern of hierarchy, men spoke to one another in the presence of women, but the reverse was not true.<sup>9</sup> In addition, young and low-status men informed mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and (for the latter) wives about men's affairs, whereas no one brought news to the adult men. A conspiracy of silence excluded men from the women's world.<sup>10</sup>

My research was perhaps most profoundly affected by the non-directive approach I took. The result of the confluence of principle, personal predilection, and circumstance, my unwillingness to pursue questions aggressively or conduct structured interviews limited the extent to which I could study some matters systematically. It also enabled me to form my inquiry around matters that the Bedouins themselves found most interesting and central. My position of powerlessness in the community prevented me from coercing people into discussions in which they had no interest. Nor had I

any desire to do so. I appreciated their perception of me as different from those researchers they had previously encountered. I heard stories of the "exams" these researchers had given them (questionnaires) and the hilariously wild tales the Bedouins had fed them. But because I had wished to live with them they assumed it must be on ordinary social terms. I was reluctant to violate these terms, and thus I rarely took notes or tape-recorded when they spoke (except later when I began collecting poetry) but rather wrote notes from memory at night or at odd moments during the day, and I tried to ask questions when people were already discussing a particular subject or event instead of out of the blue. In this manner I was able to elicit freely the Bedouins' conceptions of their social world, and I was led to the discovery of poetry's importance in social life. Had I rigidly structured my research in advance, I would have been blind to both.

### *Poetry and Sentiment*

A fog of despair shrouds  
the eye, just when it starts to clear . . .

yiksīhā dhibāb il-yās  
il-'ēn wēn mā rāg jūhā . . .

This poem was recited to me by the robust, middle-aged wife of a powerful tribal leader. We were sitting together at a ceremony of reconciliation (*ṣuluḥ*) involving two extremely close tribal segments that had split after a death resulting from a squabble between cousins. The atmosphere was tense. The women, sitting in a tent overlooking the plain where several large white ceremonial tents had been pitched for the men, anxiously watched the men's comings and goings. At one point several of the women disappeared into the nearby house and began a haunting chant. When I looked puzzled, the woman who had taken me as her responsibil-

ity in this group of strangers explained that they were reminded of and crying over their deceased relative. As the hours passed and it became clear that the meeting had gone smoothly, the women relaxed a bit. Some of those not closely related to the reconciling segments tried to entertain me by reciting poems, including the one above.

When I returned home after that long day, the women of my camp quizzed me on every detail of whom and what I'd seen, speculating and arguing as I gave my account. When I read this poem and described the woman who had recited it, they figured out who she was and explained the meaning of the poem. They did so not by telling me what the words meant but by recounting to me how she had lost her only son two and a half years earlier. He had been shot through the mouth in an altercation between some Bedouin men and a group of Egyptian soldiers riding on a train through a Bedouin area. It was not until much later that I was able to translate the poem and to grasp its significance as an expression of the sadness she had felt at losing him, an expression triggered by the painful remembrance of the murdered young man on the occasion of his relatives' reconciliation and perhaps recited in empathy with the mourning women.

Listening and observing everyday life and social interactions both in public and in the intimacy of the domestic world, I had noticed that people often sang or punctuated their conversations with short poems. Everyone showed great interest in these poems and often seemed moved when they heard them. At first I ignored them, since I had no interest in poetry. I had come to study the patterning and meaning of interpersonal relations, in particular between men and women, so I merely jotted in my fieldnotes that people seemed to love reciting some sad-sounding short poems. After a few incidents, however, I began to wonder what these poems meant and why they were so valued by the Bedouins. I began to pay attention to them.

The first poem I recorded was by an old woman in another camp I visited. She and some of the other women there knew women in